

Op-Ed Opinion

MASON: Forecasting the Weather



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“Weathering” describes the erosive effect on things that are constantly exposed or otherwise unprotected from the elements. The term also is used to describe the erosive effect on the health of Black people caused by constant exposure to racism: stress-related conditions such as hypertension, stroke, diabetes, high infant mortality and premature death. Early indications are that Black and brown people are dying from COVID-19 in overwhelmingly disproportionate numbers. If those numbers hold true through the end of the pandemic, then racism’s “weathering” of Black health will certainly have been a factor.

The added stress of economic hardship accelerates the “weathering” phenomenon. While the rest of us practice social distancing and fret over how to master Zoom, poor

people have more weighty worries. They are “essential” employees, required to report to work or lose their jobs. They stock the shelves, deliver the food, drive the buses, clean the bedpans and work in close quarters at Amazon warehouses. They do all of this while using public transportation, living in food deserts, tending to the health-challenged elderly, and struggling to help school their children, often without access to computers or the internet.

Poor Black and brown people are more likely to be exposed to the virus. They are also more likely to be less healthy and have less access to adequate health care. When one adds the fact that they are last in line to receive protection, the racial and economic disproportionality of this pandemic’s death toll is predictable as was the pandemic itself.

According to the New York Times, President Trump received information back in January, forecasting that large numbers of Americans would die from the virus. The president says he never saw that information. As the media predictably makes headlines out of such implausible statements, the assault on Black and brown populations continues. Immigrant children disappear, health care for the poor diminishes, social safety nets weaken, and the watchdogs who keep government honest are neutered. The real news takes a back seat to the performance at center stage. It is a now-familiar act in a play of ominous design.

Who have we become, whose senators sell stock in companies that lose value because of the virus, and buy stock in companies that profit from it, while they tell us there is no risk of a pandemic? What kind of citizens are we, when our president abandons us because our governors are not “nice” to him, and when he advertises his brand on checks destined for people in dire straits, and abandons the health of the world — all for the sake of his own political survival?

Have we come to resemble Germany under Hitler, Ukraine under Stalin, America in the days of Manifest Destiny and slavery? The president has said that if Black and brown voters are fully enfranchised, there will never be another Republican president. In that sense, his agenda mirrors the principles of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a direct organizational descendant of the White Citizens Councils that ran the segregated South.

You be the judge.

The erosive effects of racism on the health of Black and brown people is not news. They occur every day. They amount to the price America pays to maintain its commitment to

wealthy white privilege and white supremacy. In that sense, comparing the negative consequences of racism to the destruction caused by violent weather may seem appropriate, but it is not accurate. While the weather is a force of nature, unfolding on its own, racism is created and wielded by human beings. While the weather erodes rocks, racism wears down people. Stormy weather is fueled by wind and rain. Toxic racism is fueled by fear and greed. The weather is neither good nor bad, it just is. Racism is clearly evil.

We do not yet know the ultimate impact this pandemic will have on our lives. All we know is that things will be different. Ingrained inequities are being magnified, along with the outstanding work that must be done if the idea we call America is to succeed. If we continue to serve only the few at the expense of the many, then our dream of one nation as a vision for one world will crumble, and this pandemic will cause a free-for-all.

The question is, who are we?

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